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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES GENDER SEGREGATION WITH U/S
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

11. (SBU) Summary: During a July 2 meeting with Undersecretary (U/S) for Higher Education Dr. Rasha Al Sabah, the Ambassador raised the issue of gender segregation and its potential impact on mixed-gender programs, such as the State Department-sponsored and AMIDEAST-administered ACCESS English Language Microscholarship Program and the private schools American diplomatic dependents attend. The U/S indicated that she was not sanguine that much could be done to forestall this. On a more encouraging note, she announced that 501 of the new 1500 Government of Kuwait-sponsored (GOK) scholarships will be designated for study in the United States -- a 400 percent increase from the scholarships available in 2007. In passing she also mentioned that more emphasis was being given to vocational training for Kuwaiti youth. End Summary.

12. (SBU) During her initial office call on Dr. Rasha Al Sabah, the Undersecretary for Higher Education, at the Ministry of Education on July 2, Ambassador raised the issue of gender segregation in the Kuwaiti educational system. Ambassador asked U/S Al Sabah how increased gender segregation could affect mixed-gender programs such as the ACCESS English Language Microscholarship Program and the local American curriculum schools diplomatic dependents attend. U/S Al Sabah replied that "this is our democracy," and explained that since the GoK funds the educational system, the National Assembly makes the determination in regard to gender segregation. In contrast to the U.S., where such a decision could be challenged by other branches of government, no such alternative currently exists in Kuwait. The only way to change such a vote by the National Assembly would be for a subsequent Parliament to overturn the previous decision.

13. (U) Prior to a subsequent announcement to the press, U/S Al Sabah announced to the Ambassador that there will be a 400 percent increase in GOK-sponsored scholarships for study in the United States. Out of the 1500 new GOK-sponsored scholarships, 501 will be designated for study in the U.S. U/S Al Sabah explained that the increase was due to the GOK's vision for Kuwait becoming a regional hub for tourism and trade. Towards that end, the Ministry is looking to provide scholarships to Kuwaiti students in fields ranging from finance to environmental sciences to hospitality services. The latter would even include scholarships to culinary schools, a specialization which would be considered shocking to many in Kuwaiti society.

14. (SBU) Comment: U/S Al Sabah seemed resigned to the increasing gender segregation in Kuwait's schools starting with higher education. This trend would have an impact on U.S. Embassy dependents if/when it extends to private primary and secondary schools, and could also potentially affect State Department-sponsored programs such as ACCESS. However, U/S Al Sabah's positive announcement of the increase in scholarships underscores the value of having a U.S.-educated person in a senior position within the Ministry of Education.

15. (SBU) Comment continued: This sense of inevitability about gender segregation was echoed in another and subsequent conversation the Ambassador had with Ms. Fareah Al-Saqqaf, the director of a private organization (the Lothan Youth Achievement Center) that conducts civic awareness, cultural, educational, and vocational training activities for Kuwaiti youth of both genders in integrated settings. The director mentioned that she preferred to keep her organization listed as a private company, rather than seek registration under any GOK-sanctioned charter, precisely to avoid meddling by religious conservatives who might prompt GOK officials to insist that youth activities at her center be gender segregated. Interestingly, Ms. Al-Saqqaf also mentioned that her center provides opportunities for Kuwaiti youth to learn such vocational skills as culinary services and that these classes are popular. PAO will follow up with AMIDEAST to determine whether their programs, including ACCESS, are vulnerable to this directive towards gender segregation. End Comments.

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